



Greetings!

Dear alumni and friends, I am happy to share the Department of Linguistics Fall 2022 newsletter. Our Department continues to change and grow. Distinguished Prof. Mark Aronoff has retired but will remain in the Department as a Toll Professor, and we have hired two new faculty members: Assistant Prof. Sandhya Sundaresan and Associate Prof. Thomas McFadden. You will learn more about them in this newsletter. We are also proud to tell you about the many awards and honors that members of our Department have recently won. Prof. Richard Larson was promoted to the rank of SUNY Distinguished Professor, Prof. Jeffrey Heinz was awarded the Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Activities, and Prof. Thomas Graf won the Excellence in Graduate Mentoring Award. Our PhD students Andrija Petrovic and Anna Melnikova were also recognized for their excellence in teaching, and Dakotah Lambert received the highly prestigious Distinguished Doctoral Award. Congratulations to all!

Below I share information on our newest faculty members, an interview with a recently retired faculty member, and some of the outreach activities to high school students organized by Linguistics Department. We hope you enjoy keeping up with the news from our Department. Check out our [webpage](#) to find out more, and please stop by and visit when you are in the area!

Best wishes,

Lori Repetti

Lori Repetti,
Professor and Chair



PS. Thanks to our undergraduate communications intern, Lauren Leon, for her assistance with this newsletter!

Faculty Spotlight

Welcome aboard to the newest faculty members in the Department!

Prof. Sandhya Sundaresan has just joined our Department as an Assistant Professor of Linguistics, and the Anandavalli and Dr. G. Swaminathan Endowed Research Professor in Tamil. This endowed professorship was established in 2017 to advance Tamil language and culture, and Prof. Sundaresan is the inaugural holder of the position. Her 2013 PhD was jointly awarded by the University of Tromsø/University of Stuttgart, and her research focuses on syntax, in particular Dravidian syntax and variation. To that end, she conducts fieldwork with native speakers of different dialects of Tamil and plans to establish a field station in India to study Tamil dialect variation. The field station will be open to all scholars at SBU to study various aspects of Tamil life and culture.



Prof. Thomas McFadden is a new Associate Professor of Linguistics. He received his PhD in 2004 from the University of Pennsylvania and has since held positions at the University of Stuttgart, the University of Tromsø, and the Leibniz-Centre General Linguistics (ZAS) in Berlin. His research focuses on theoretical and comparative syntax and morphology with a particular interest in questions surrounding the syntax-morphology interface. He also has a long-standing interest in historical linguistics, especially corpus-based historical syntax, and he has done comparative work on a number of languages, most frequently the modern and historical Germanic languages and Tamil.

Conversation with Prof. Mark Aronoff

In Spring 2022, Prof. Mark Aronoff retired from Stony Brook after 48 years on the faculty. During his long and illustrious career he has studied many aspects of morphology, orthography, sign languages, and beyond. In addition to being Professor and Founding Chair (1980-1993) of the Department, he served in various capacities in the Office of the Provost between 1998-2011 (Associate Provost, Deputy Provost, Vice Provost), and in 2005 he was elected President of the Linguistic Society of America.



Q. What do you consider to be one of the highlights of your career? There is no single highlight. I am pleased that the work that I have done in Linguistics over nearly half a century remains relevant. For example, my first book still gets cited regularly, as does my research on sign language, in particular my decades-long work on the young Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language. I have always greatly enjoyed teaching, especially at the undergraduate level. More recently, a couple of the asynchronous online courses that I have worked on in the last decade have been very successful. Most Linguistics students don't know that I spent a decade working on undergraduate education across the university, where I would like to think I made a difference. Finally, I am very proud of our Linguistics Department. It is a special place!

Q. Do you have a favorite teaching story/memory? I have taught LIN 101 regularly throughout my entire career, pretty much every year. The highlight of that course is the lecture on English infixation. Nobody forgets it. Most recently, I was visiting an audiologist whose very first class at Stony Brook was LIN 101. I introduced myself, he did a double-take, and exclaimed with a grin: Massa-f*cking-pequa!

Q. Why did you choose SBU? I took a one-year position at Stony Brook in 1974 right after receiving my PhD from MIT. It was that, or a year in Paris, so naturally I chose Stony Brook. Somehow, they never told me that the year was up.

Q. What are your post-retirement plans? I will remain at Stony Brook for three years as a Toll Professor, engaged in a number of projects. One is to create an online version of LIN 101, similar in spirit and structure to LIN 200 "Language in the USA".

Outreach to High School Students

We have been active in many outreach activities to high school students, including a special workshop in January 2022 organized with a local high school, an annual summer camp in Computational Linguistics, and the North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad.

In January 2022, our Department collaborated with a local high school — the Stony Brook School — to hold a workshop designed to challenge high school students to devise a writing system for American Sign Language (ASL). The students had chosen to take a week-long special topics mini-course in Linguistics, during which they would study a different aspect of Linguistics each morning followed by hands-on activities in the afternoon. Faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate majors from our Department facilitated the afternoon sessions. On the last day of the course, the class came to our Department to demonstrate their “final project”: devised orthographies for ASL. The students taught volunteers from our Department how to encode ASL signs in their newly created orthographies, and the volunteers then had to write a message for the students to decipher. Afterward, we invited the students to take a tour of our Department, and we hosted a small reception.



The collaboration was organized by teacher Stephen Stortz, who had taught the mini course before, and Prof. Richard Larson, who is also involved with the Linguistic Society of America’s High School Linguistics initiative to bring introductory linguistics courses to high schools. The structure of the course was decided over several joint meetings between Stortz and the Linguistics Department volunteers. An ASL orthography was chosen as the students’ final project for a multitude of reasons: the students had prior exposure to both topics thanks to Prof. Jenny Singleton, who gave a lesson on sign language, and Prof. Mark Aronoff, who gave a lesson on spelling and orthography. In addition, since there is currently no existing orthography for sign language, the students would have a unique and unanswered problem to solve.

The teaching of ASL is being extended in our Department, from summer courses only, to offerings during the academic year, along with Linguistics courses on sign languages, such as a brand new course offered for the first time in fall 2022 by Prof. Jenny Singleton: LIN 235 “Sign Languages and Deaf Communities”. “Sign languages are usually treated as ‘add-ons’ or a separate topic area within the Linguistics curriculum” said Prof. Larson when asked for further comment about the program’s focus on sign language. “We are still treating human language – that fundamental capacity – as a capacity for vocal speech. But it should be recognized from the beginning that human language is fundamentally more abstract than speech. I would like to see the US introductory Linguistics curriculum entirely reorganized to incorporate these ideas from the very beginning, so that signed and tactile languages become part of our core subject matter.”

As for the Stony Brook School high school students who took the class, they found the subject matter to be interesting and would like to have an expanded opportunity to learn more about Linguistics in the future. “It was quite interesting to learn about language composition and how it might differ in the context of real-life usage,” said one student, adding that they felt the course could have been even more informative had it been longer than one week. The course was also valuable to those who already had a vested interest in Linguistics. “The minicourse has given me much information regarding this field of study, and I really appreciated the opportunity to learn more about this discipline that I am so passionate about,” said another student, who intends to study Linguistics in college.

Outreach to High School Students



This past summer, we held the third iteration of SYCCL, the Summer Youth Camp for Computational Linguistics, in collaboration with the Institute for Advanced Computational Science (IACS). High school students from across the US attended both in person and via Zoom to learn about representing linguistic problems in a computational manner. The program was led by graduate students in our Department (Kalina Kostyszyn and Scott Nelson) along with other student volunteers (Kenneth Hanson, Han Li, Yola Radrianantoanina). Special guest sessions were lead by other members of the Linguistics Department, including Prof. Jordan Kodner who talked about language acquisition, Prof. Richard Larson who introduced lexical semantics, Prof. Jenny Singleton who presented information on sign language databases, and PhD student John David Storment who told the students about his research on emoji linguistics. The two-week long camp culminated in a series of presentations by the students who used the skills they had learned to develop various projects, ranging from voice re-synthesis to random word generators.

For the past decade, SBU, the Department of Linguistics, and IACS have hosted the National Science Foundation-sponsored North American Computational Linguistics Olympiad (NACLO), a competition for US and Canadian middle and high school students interested in linguistics, languages, and computation. We organize training sessions and host the NACLO Open Round consisting of a challenging and fun series of puzzles which students have to solve during a 3-hour test. More difficult problems are introduced in the Invitational Round, and winners from that round represent the US and Canada at the International Linguistics Olympiad. No previous knowledge of linguistics or computing is required since the puzzles can be solved with analytic reasoning and problem-solving skills. We are very proud that our students have done so well in the years that we have participated in NACLO. We have had many students from our group make it to the Invitational Round, and one of our semi-finalists made it all the way to the international competition!



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